

# THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART

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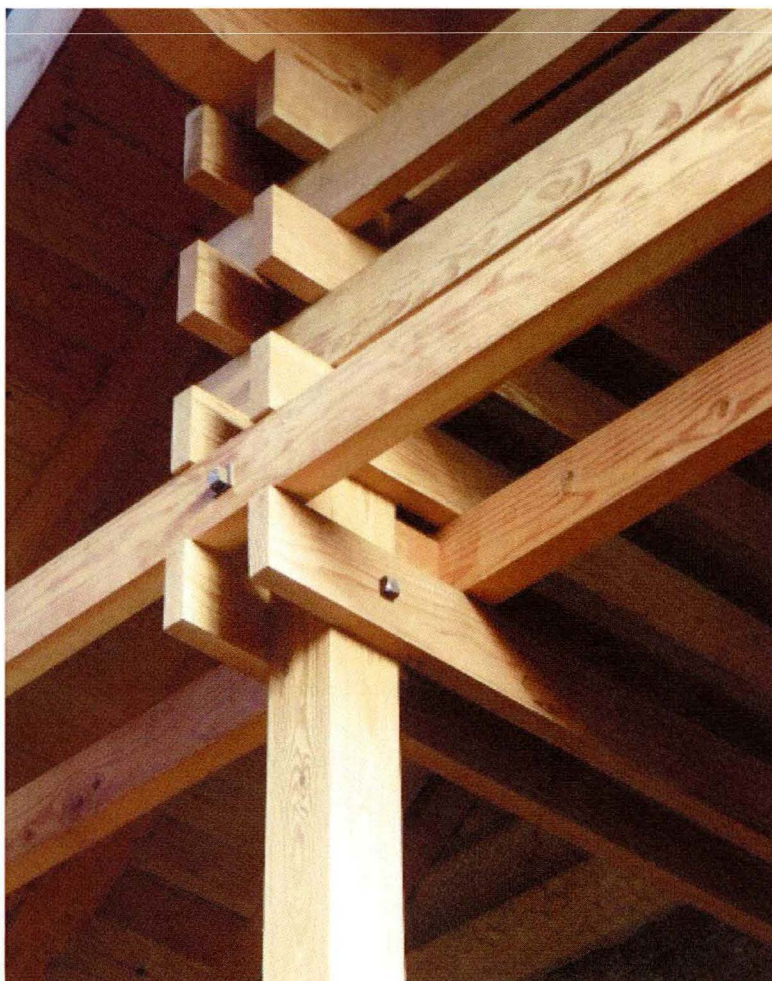
Erin McQuarrie

Year 4 Textiles

The Glasgow School of Art

*Ma, Mon, Tori-i*: The influence of Japanese art and design on Charles Rennie

Mackintosh's masterwork The Glasgow School Art.



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## Synopsis

This extended essay will explore the ways in which the architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh incorporated Japanese aesthetics in his design for The Glasgow School of Art, specifically considering his awareness of the concept *Ma* and the representation of cultural symbols *Mon* and *Tori-i*. Why, at the turn of the twentieth century in Glasgow, was Mackintosh inspired by Japan? I will contemplate changes in trade, exhibitions, fellow artists that travelled there and the importance of his friendship with Hermann Muthesius. What was he hoping to achieve by incorporating a Japanese influence? I will consider specific aspects of traditional Japanese architecture and art that influenced the creation of Mackintosh's unique interiors. How was his work received? I will discuss the reception of Mackintosh's designs in both the West and Japan. To reflect upon these proposed questions and portray the ways in which Mackintosh evokes a Japanese sensibility, I will consider the views of leading Japanese architects, Kengo Kuma and Arata Isozaki, and consult the following key texts: *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Manet, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan* by Ayako Ono, *Found In Translation: Mackintosh, Muthesius, and Japan* by Neil Jackson, *C. R. Mackintosh: The Poetics of Workmanship* by David Brett. In conclusion, I will demonstrate why the Japanese influence found in Mackintosh's design for The Glasgow School of Art has been a vital element in contributing to the allure and success of his masterwork over a hundred years later.

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## Introduction

In the early twentieth century, Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868-1928), Glasgow born architect, artist and designer broke away from the norms of the Neo-classical style, inspired by ridged symmetry and historicism, and provided a new depiction of what architecture could be.<sup>1</sup> His unique designs instead, provide an air of mystique, influenced by the natural world and exotic allure of Japan. Leading Japanese architect, Kengo Kuma, describes how artists and architects working in Mackintosh's time, gained an understanding by visiting Japan and studying its culture. He labels this as the "catch ball" approach and identifies it as the "mother of creation", meaning that these initial journeys allowed an important cultural dialogue between Japan and the West to begin.<sup>2</sup> On returning home, artists and designers portrayed typical scenes of Japanese life, eager to share their new insights with the West.<sup>3</sup> However, Mackintosh never travelled to Japan, with the result that his work does not depict the traditional Japanese archetype but something much more unique, as he juxtaposes its influence with other styles. This essay will examine the qualities in his work that demonstrate this. I will consider the vibrant art scene in Glasgow in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Mackintosh's influential relationship with fellow architect, Hermann Muthesius, which led to a key interest in the art and architecture of Japan. Following this, I will examine how Mackintosh cultivated a unique vision of the East in his most renowned work, The Glasgow School of Art (1897-1909).<sup>4</sup> I will do this by specifically considering his translation of the Japanese concept *Ma*, which considers a relationship between time and space, his use of heraldic emblems *Mon* and representation of *Tori-i*, symbolic gateways that, in Japan, mark the entrance to Shinto shrines. I will state why the Japanese influence has played such a vital role in the legacy of

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<sup>1</sup> William, Buchanan, *Mackintosh's Masterwork, The Glasgow School of Art* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1994), p.20.

<sup>2</sup> V&A Museum of Design Dundee, 'Kengo Kuma in Conversation', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cblF3fBZ4y4>, [Accessed 18 October 2017].

<sup>3</sup> Ayako, Ono, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p.21.

<sup>4</sup> Buchanan, p.44.



Mackintosh's art school structure and consider the future of his most prestigious work at a significant point in its history after its partial devastation by fire in May 2014.

I have a passion for the arts of Japan, having completed an exchange in Tokyo in my second year of study at The Glasgow School of Art. In addition, I am also currently a tour guide at the school, which entails describing Mackintosh's work and connection with the institution to visitors from across the world. These personal connections have been a key factor in my decision to explore this topic and their influence underpins all of my research.



## Glasgow

The Edo period in Japan dates from 1603-1867, under the Shogun's rule, there was dramatic isolation from trade with the rest of the world for over 250 years. This ended only in 1867 when, due to political pressure, the country's control was transferred to the Emperor Meiji.<sup>5</sup> Soon, the appeal of looking to their Western counterparts for inspiration was evident and Japan opened its ports to the world. With these advancements came a new connection between Scotland and Japan. Glasgow at this point in the nineteenth century was a booming industrial centre with a prominent shipping industry, which allowed a wealth of objects from the East to enter the city through its thriving ports. Amongst these were many art objects ranging from textiles to woodblock prints and, now readily accessible, these desirable items were consumed by the emerging artists of the city.<sup>6</sup> By 1875 the interest in Japan had grown and as a result of this phenomenon, the term '*Japonisme*' was established to describe "the study of the art and genius of Japan".<sup>7</sup>

Charles Rennie Mackintosh was born in Glasgow in 1868. Aged 15, he enrolled as a student at The Glasgow School of Art where he took architectural night classes from 1883-1894.<sup>8</sup> In 1878, Glasgow's museums acquired 1,150 Japanese art objects which were displayed at The Corporation City Art Galleries.<sup>9</sup> The school facilities at this point were situated in the basement of The Corporation Galleries, so Mackintosh most likely had his first introduction to Japanese art visiting the exhibits in the galleries above.

From 1889, alongside his studies at the art school, he completed an apprenticeship with firm John Hutchison and then went onto work as a Junior Architectural Draughtsman with the Glasgow firm

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<sup>5</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Edo Period', <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tokugawa-period>, [Accessed 5 November 2017].

<sup>6</sup> Ono, p.21.

<sup>7</sup> Ono, p.1.

<sup>8</sup> GSA Archives and Collections, 'Mackintosh', <http://www.gsaarchives.net/mackintosh/>, [Accessed November 5].

<sup>9</sup> Ono, p.21.

Honeymann and Keppie.<sup>10</sup> He also immersed himself in the vibrant fine art scene, influenced by his talented fellow students, Herbert MacNair, Francis MacDonald and her sister Margaret MacDonald. Margaret and Charles became extremely close and after collaborating as students, formed a strong romantic union, going on to be married in 1900.<sup>11</sup> Together, they created The Glasgow Style, taking inspiration from the Celtic Revival and Oriental art. David Brett describes The Four's work as "metamorphic, eroticized and dreamy."<sup>12</sup> They adopted new influences from the East and amalgamated these with symbols from the natural world and the ethereal elongated forms of pagan females. The work of The Four, especially the MacDonald sisters, was bold, controversial and exciting. Without doubt, their engaging presence and their skill, as Brett states, had a profound effect on Mackintosh, providing him with "the conceptual framework that allowed him to surpass his architectural training."<sup>13</sup> This can be seen clearly in Figure 1, displaying Mackintosh's 1894 poster design for The Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts.

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<sup>10</sup> GSA Archives and Collections, 'Mackintosh', <http://www.gsaarchives.net/mackintosh/>, [Accessed 5 November 2017].

<sup>11</sup> Mackintosh Architecture Concept, Making and Meaning, 'Life Events', <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/timeline/lifeevents/>, [Accessed 5 November 2017].

<sup>12</sup>David, Brett, *C. R. Mackintosh: The Poetics of Workmanship* (London: Reaktion Books Limited, 1992), p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Brett, p.29.

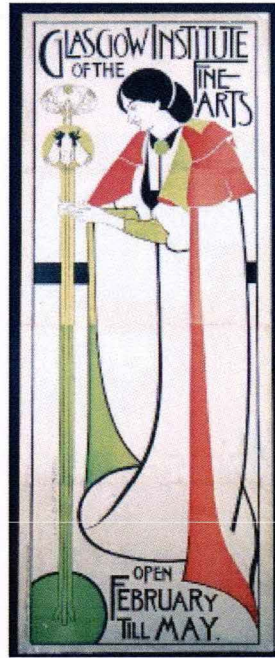


Figure 1: Charles Rennie Mackintosh Poster for 'The Glasgow Institute of the Fine Arts' c.1894-6

The simple black line of this lithograph, echoes the line of Ukyo-e woodblock prints and the representation of the female with a simply swept hairstyle, dressed in long flowing garments, is reminiscent of a Japanese woman wearing a Kimono. Akiko Fukai, Chief Curator at The Kyoto Costume Institute, talks of the attractiveness of the Kimono to westerner's eyes when they encountered them for the first time. A Kimono is two dimensional until fitted to the wearer, when it then takes on a three dimensional form, in contrast to the elaborately decorated full bodied dresses worn in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain.<sup>14</sup> Akiko states:

Japanese Kimono emphasized the material, the fabric of clothing, and held the beauty of the textiles in the highest regard.<sup>15</sup>

*The Kimono's shape and bold display of the textile was intriguing to the West. Indeed, Mackintosh used the Kimono shape in his own furniture design too, allowing him to arrange the materials he chose, in an open and inviting way. This can be compared to the presentation of fabric in a Kimono*

<sup>14</sup> Akiko, Fukai, *Japonisme in Fashion* (Kyoto: Kyoto Costume Institute, 1996), p.6.

<sup>15</sup> Fukai, p.6.



pattern. Figure 2, shows how he translated the flat dimensions of the garment in the design for a bookcase.<sup>16</sup>

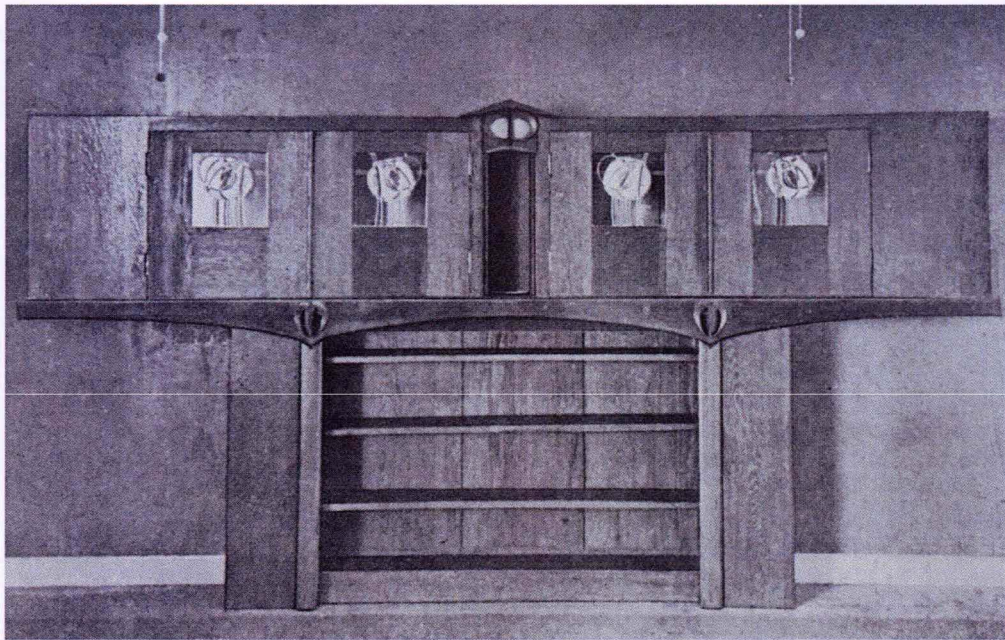


Figure 2: Bookcase (known as the Kimono Cabinet) by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1901, designed for Windyhill House

A further representation of Japan was presented in Glasgow during the 1901 International Exhibition, where its pavilion, shown in Figure 3, stood alongside that of Canada and Russia.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 3: Once formally The Kelvingrove Mansion the Japanese pavilion sits positioned on the South bank of the river Kelvin

<sup>16</sup> Antony, Jones, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (London: Studio Editions, 1990), p.40.

<sup>17</sup> The University of Glasgow Special Collections, 'Glasgow International Exhibition 1901', <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/month/oct1999.html>, [Accessed 3 November 2017].



Mackintosh himself, through the firm Honeymann and Keppie, had in fact submitted an unsuccessful proposal to design the exhibition's Industrial Hall.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, his work was still displayed there in the stand he designed to represent The Glasgow School of Art, shown in Figure 4.



*Figure 4: Charles Rennie Mackintosh - Stand for The Glasgow School of Art at the 1901 Glasgow International Exhibition*

An architectural journal of the time describes the stand as designed:

To show how simply an erection of the sort may be built...but there is honestly no doubt as to the genuineness of the artistic impulse. Whether it is quite wise in him to follow it so unhesitatingly is another question – which time will answer.<sup>19</sup>

Mackintosh's utilitarian design is regarded as too simplistic. However, the critic acknowledges that his style, although not yet celebrated by the masses, represents Mackintosh as an architect with a

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<sup>18</sup> Mackintosh Architecture, Concept Making and Meaning, 'Competition Design for Glasgow International 1901', <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/freetext/display/?rs=13&xml=des&q=Glasgow%20International%20Exhibition>, [Accessed 3 November 2017].

<sup>19</sup> Mackintosh Architecture, Concept Making and Meaning, 'Competition Design for Glasgow International 1901', <http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/freetext/display/?rs=13&xml=des&q=Glasgow%20International%20Exhibition>, [Accessed 3 November 2017].

strong, clear, individual vision. Over one hundred years later, Japanese architect, Arata Izaki, discusses how his style is viewed today in Japan:

A Japanese person looking at the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh is immediately struck by how 'Japanese' his designs are. The simplicity needs no explanation.<sup>20</sup>

The 1901 critic was sceptical of the simplicity of Mackintosh's design but Izaki confirms that with pursuing this simple style comes success. The shape of the structure represents the form of a traditional teahouse and the considered carpentry presents a geometric lattice pattern, like that of the grids seen in Japan's interior shoji screens. Figure 5, depicts a type of structural drawing, known as okoshi-ezu and used by Japanese carpenters, to analyse the proportions of their teahouse designs.<sup>21</sup> The similarities with Mackintosh's stand are evident and the diagram gives us an insight into how the simple structure may have been assembled.

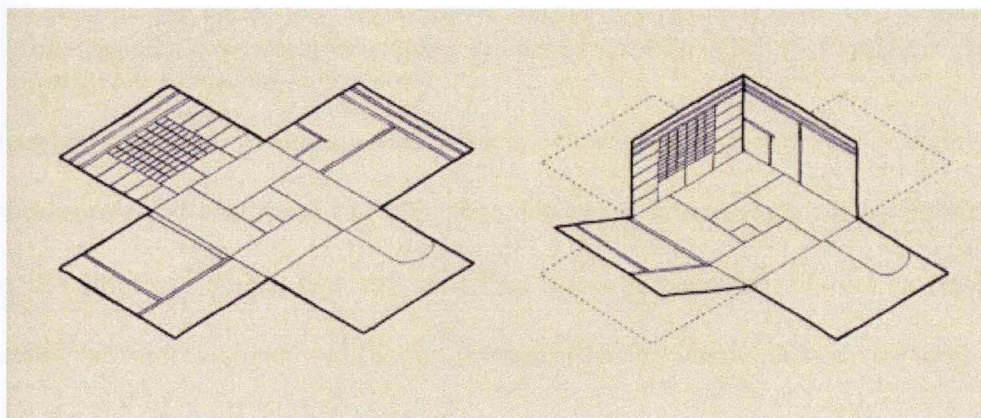


Figure 5: Okoshi-ezu- displays the design and proportions of a traditional teahouse, with a tatami mat floor and shoji screen walls.

Alongside the strong representation of Japan in Glasgow's gallery spaces and exhibitions, Mackintosh may also have been inspired by fellow artists who had travelled to Japan and returned home to share their knowledge with the West. Prime examples are painters George Henry and Edward Atkinson Hornel who visited Japan between 1893-94 and returned to Glasgow with a new found style. They depicted typical scenes of everyday Japanese life, influenced by the compositions

<sup>20</sup> Arata Izaki, quoted by Crawford, Allan in, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Glasgow: Abberville Press, 1996), p.346.

<sup>21</sup> Mira, Locher, *Traditional Japanese Architecture: An Exploration of Elements and Forms* (USA: Tuttle, 2010), p.137.



found in Yokohama Shashin, traditional tourist postcards.<sup>22</sup> Theorist, Ayako Ono, states that the Yokohama Shashin images, particularly for Hornel, were not a source from which to produce an accurate portrayal of Japan but a vehicle to create “exotic impressions of Japan” in a western painter’s style.<sup>23</sup> In 1895 Mackintosh designed another poster for the Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts exhibition at which Hornel’s painting *A Geisha* was on display.<sup>24</sup> John Keppie also gave a lecture on behalf of Hornel, in the Corporation Galleries, which gave great insight into their trip and accounts of Japanese life.<sup>25</sup> As John Keppie was Mackintosh’s current employer, at Honeyman and Keppie, he was most likely an eager audience member.

Antony Jones, states that Mackintosh did not create solely impressions of Japan:

It was not in Mackintosh’s character to rely on a superficial imitation of anything. Instead, he looked for and understood the symbolic and spiritual meaning in the arts of Japan, and in them found a new, historically unencumbered source on which to draw for inspiration, though not for imitation.<sup>26</sup>

In agreement, architectural historian, Neil Jackson, believes Mackintosh’s work does not depict Japan in a representational sense, but that his sophisticated structural knowledge of its traditional architecture, displays a deeper understanding.<sup>27</sup> He states this was derived from his close friendship with German architect Hermann Muthesius. Previously having worked in Japan for three and a half years, Muthesius relocated to England in 1897 and was encouraged by art historian Meier-Graefe to meet with Mackintosh, whose designs were now receiving acclaim in Germany.<sup>28</sup> Alongside bearing gifts, like Ukiyo-e woodblocks, Muthesius was able to share his first-hand knowledge of the country and its architecture. Jackson believes meeting Muthesius, at this particular point in time, heavily

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<sup>22</sup> Ono, p.115.

<sup>23</sup> Ono, p.138.

<sup>24</sup> Neil, Jackson, *Found In Translation: Mackintosh, Muthesius, and Japan* (London: Japan Society Proceedings, 2014), p.91.

<sup>25</sup> Ono, p.223.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, p.38.

<sup>27</sup> Jackson, p.97.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson, p.92.

influenced Mackintosh's consequent work, as following this, a sophisticated knowledge of Japan's traditional building methods clearly informed Mackintosh's own designs.<sup>29</sup>

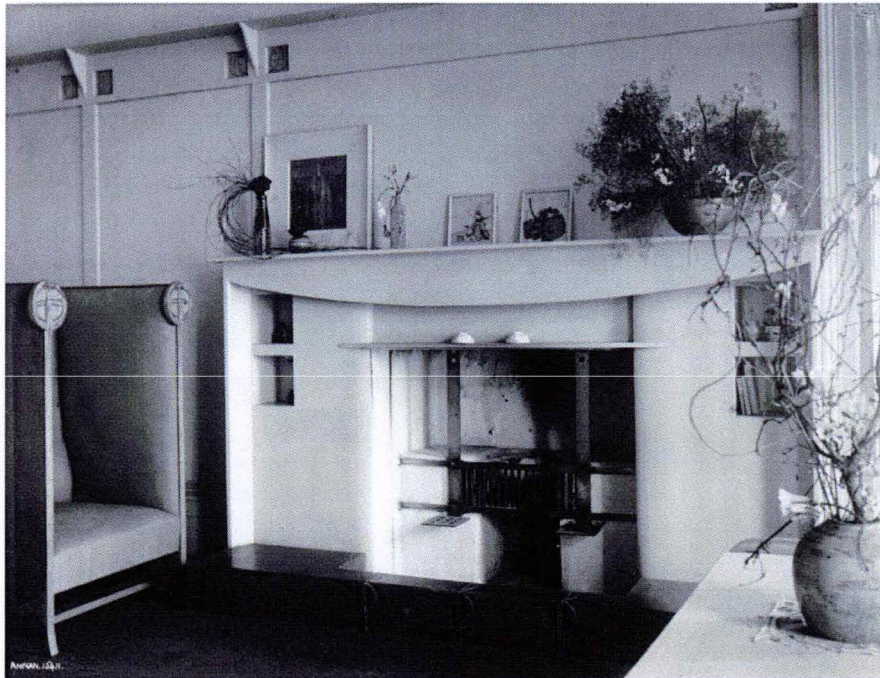


Figure 6: Hermann Muthesius gifted Japanese prints to Mackintosh, visible on the mantel piece at Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald's first home at 120 Mains Street, Glasgow.

This chapter has highlighted how Mackintosh was exposed to Japan through personal relationships, events and exhibitions in Glasgow. In 1897, Mackintosh's firm Honeymann and Keppie took on their most ambitious commission; designing the first purpose built building for the Glasgow School of Art.<sup>30</sup> Mackintosh, having graduated only three years prior, would have been fully aware of the school's requirements, such as improved lighting and larger studio spaces. His design catered for these needs, whilst also pursuing a new radical style of architecture. The following passages will discuss how Mackintosh's awareness of Japan aided him in creating this distinct new style and how he contextualised elements of its art and culture, specifically the concept *Ma* and the cultural symbols *Mon* and *Tori-i*, within his masterwork, The Glasgow School of Art.

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<sup>29</sup> Jackson, p.93.

<sup>30</sup> Buchanan, p.21.



## Ma

The concept *Ma* is an ancient principle that describes a relationship between time and space. When applied to architecture, Arata Isozaki states *Ma* represents the “space between object and object”; the in-between space, takes precedence over structure and within this pause an air of “extravagance” is created.<sup>31</sup> It is my belief that this concept and its presence can be felt in many of the spaces Mackintosh designed within the art school structure. Figure 7, shows the interior of one of the main painting and drawing studios, Studio 43, which scales a towering 30ft in height.<sup>32</sup>

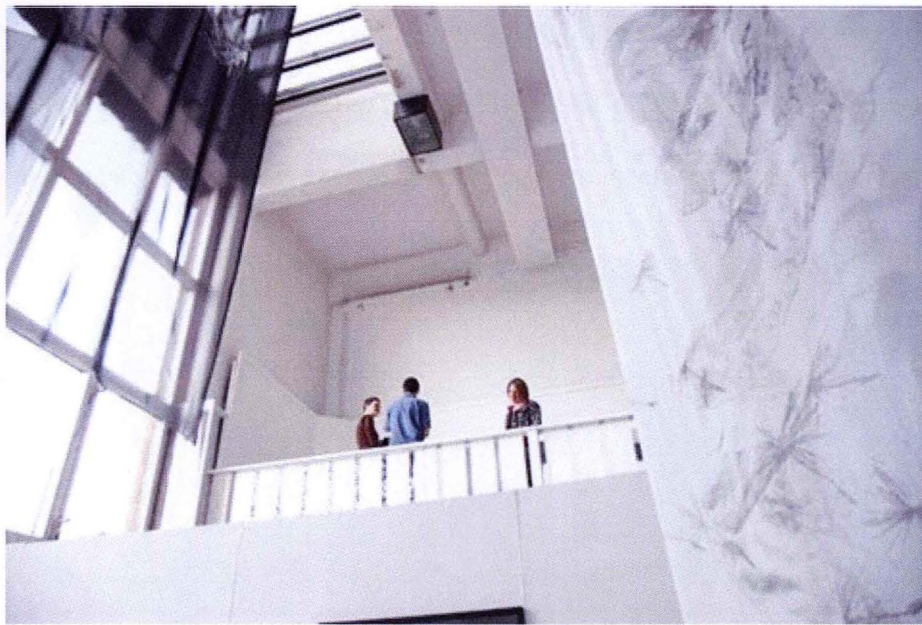


Figure 7: Interior of studio 43

These vast white spaces embody Isozaki's statement. Although sparse, the studios have an air of opulence created by the space Mackintosh devoted to them. There is a feeling of energy or a sense of potential for what the space could be filled by. *Ma* is represented by the silence in the spaces, any actions taking place within them, therefore, being raised to a higher level; the actions in this instance, being completed by the students of the school. Designing from the inside out Mackintosh took a new holistic approach to building.<sup>33</sup> Reviewing the structure on its opening, journalist, Lewis

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<sup>31</sup> Arch Daily, 'Arata Isozaki On "Ma," the Japanese Concept of In-Between Space', <https://www.archdaily.com/882896/arata-isozaki-on-ma-the-japanese-concept-of-in-between-space>, [Accessed 11 November 2017].

<sup>32</sup> Buchanan, p.112.

<sup>33</sup> Buchanan, p.21.



F. Day from the *Art Journal*, stated that the building was based on “lines nakedly utilitarian, yet everywhere revealing the marked individuality of the artist.”<sup>34</sup> The beauty of Mackintosh’s “nakedly utilitarian” studios are that they create an environment which allows complete “individuality” and freedom of expression. He is emphasising the sole function of this building is to nourish artistic capabilities.

An understanding of this concept is also apparent in the celebrated library, displayed in figure 8. The space demonstrates Mackintosh had a clear understanding of the traditional architecture of Japan, which as previously mentioned, was heavily influenced by his relationship with fellow architect, Hermann Muthesius.<sup>35</sup> Widely regarded as the most beautiful interior within the structure, David Brett states that the library conveys a sense of both “delicate ingenuity” and “monumental power”.<sup>36</sup>

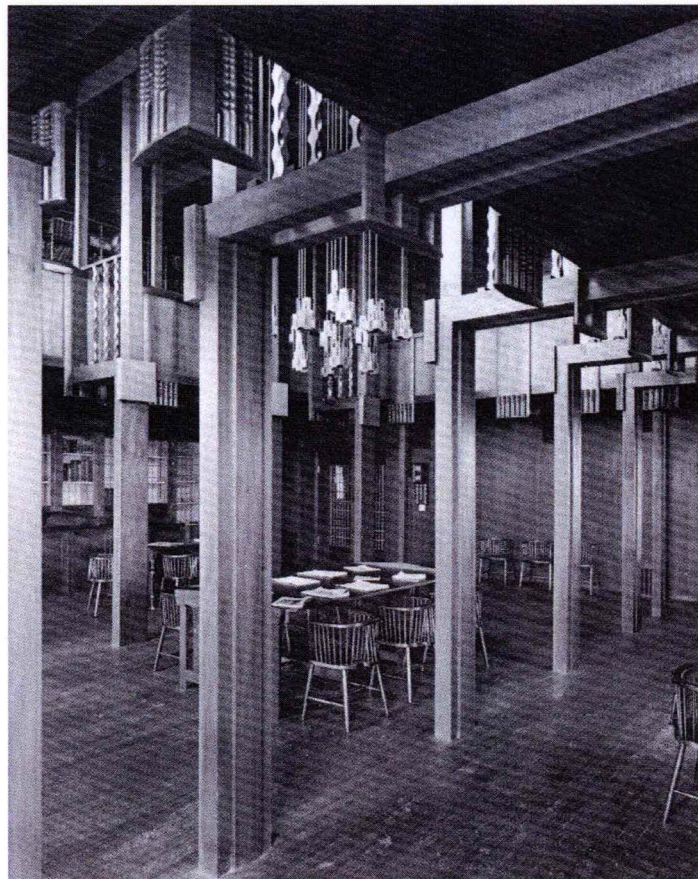


Figure 8: Interior of The Mackintosh Library

<sup>34</sup> Mackintosh Architecture, ‘Lifetime Critical Reception’, [http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/essay/?eid=crit\\_recep](http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/essay/?eid=crit_recep), [Accessed 21 December 2017]

<sup>35</sup> Neil, p.97.

<sup>36</sup> Brett, p.90.

The several simple structural components within this space combine to create this momentous air. The majestic library space evokes a true sense of *Ma*, an otherworldly serenity, a haven within the busy working school. There is an almost rhythmic feel as between the structural pillars we are given an opportunity to pause. As we absorb the full space, these pauses accumulate to create a sense of intensity or weight, emulating the feeling of 'extravagance' that Arata mentions. In contrast, Brett muses that this knowledge of the building's construction means there is also an awareness of how the space could be taken apart, leading to a feeling of anxiety that something may shatter this harmonious balance.<sup>37</sup> However, we must have confidence in each simple individual element in the room and accept that this honest display of the library's structure is sound. Embrace this "nervous intensity" and acknowledge it is not an ordinary building that can evoke such powerful feelings.<sup>38</sup>

Mackintosh's library space also draws inspiration from other forms of Japanese artwork. The careers of Ukiyo-e woodblock printers flourished in Edo Japan and a large collection of their work came to Glasgow in the 1878 collection of Japanese objects received by Glasgow Museums.<sup>39</sup> Mackintosh admired the graphic style of Ukiyo-e and proudly displayed the prints that Muthesius gifted to him and Margaret MacDonald on the mantel piece in their first home at 120 Mains Street.<sup>40</sup> Ukiyo-e translates to "'picture' (e) of the 'floating world' (ukiyo)" and their production was to demonstrate the "new world of earthly pleasures that had emerged in Edo".<sup>41</sup> Taking reference from these pictorial works, Mackintosh's library channels the same feeling in structure. The strong representation of Japan's traditional architecture in the space demonstrates he was aiming to create a feeling of something yet unexplored in Western construction.

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<sup>37</sup> Brett, p.90.

<sup>38</sup> Brett, p.90.

<sup>39</sup> Ono, p.21.

<sup>40</sup> Neil, p.94.

<sup>41</sup> Ellis, Tinios, *Japanese Prints Ukiyo-e in Edo, 1700-1900* (London, The British Museum Press 2010), p.8.



Reflecting on the composition of Mackintosh's interiors, Muthesius states:

The delicacy and austerity of their artistic atmosphere would tolerate no admixture of the ordinariness which fills our lives...they are milestones placed by a genius far ahead of us to mark the way to excellence for mankind in the future.<sup>42</sup>

Transcending the past and venturing into influences from the unknown, Mackintosh evokes the feeling of a futuristic world in his library. By combining several simple and delicate features he creates a charged atmosphere in the space, drawing us away from the familiar and mundane.

Referring back to Figure 8, depicting the famous library interior, there is almost a feeling that elements like the pendant lamps have been caught in motion. Mackintosh's library is a solid structure with dream like qualities; in fact, the library ceiling is floating, the top library store section suspended from above by iron brackets, hovering over the main visible library chamber.<sup>43</sup> Ayako Ono states that Mackintosh's use of perspective is also heavily influenced by Ukiyo-e; within the room he uses seemingly two dimensional pillars to divide the three dimensional space, these fulfil a partition like function and represent the interiors depicted in woodblock prints.<sup>44</sup> The recognition of the importance of the void and negative spaces within Ukiyo-e would have been valued by Mackintosh as they presented new visions of the modern living and working spaces.<sup>45</sup>

We must admire Mackintosh's innate skill and ability to interpret these influences from the Japan's art forms in such unique ways and his desire to produce spaces that defy the norms of architecture in the West at this point. As Muthesius stated, Mackintosh's interior spaces represent architectural "milestones", pioneering new methods of building. The library is a true marker of Mackintosh's quest to pursue a new radical style and throughout its existence has continued to act, as a source of escapism from the "ordinariness which fills our lives".

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<sup>42</sup> Herman, Muthesius, *The English House* (London: Crosby Lockwood Staples, 1979), p.52.

<sup>43</sup> Buchanan, p.114.

<sup>44</sup> Ono, p.33.

<sup>45</sup> P, Nuttgens, and A MacMillan, 'Mackintosh in Context', in *Mackintosh and His Contemporaries* (London: John Murray Publishers, 1998), p.30.



## Mon

As Japonisme took flight, Ono states that *Mon* were key features in the works of many western artists and designers.<sup>46</sup> Depictions of the motifs, were used as decorative elements in metalworking and as embellishments around the frames of paintings. Examples can be seen in silverware by Christopher Dresser and paintings by James McNeill Whistler such as: *Caprice in Purple and Gold: The Golden Screen* and *Purple and Rose: The Lange Leizen of The Six Marks*.<sup>47</sup> *Mon* are defined as:

Japanese heraldic devices used to decorate and identify an individual or family. The display on a kimono of the *Mon* or family crest followed a strict protocol. These emblems announced one's familial or, in certain cases, civic affiliations.<sup>48</sup>

However, Mackintosh chose to ignore this "strict protocol" and extracts *Mon* from their association with Kimono or representation of a family. Instead, he opts, to explore them on a bold and impressive architectural scale. Figure 9, shows the wrought iron railings on the front North façade of the art school building, where we can see Mackintosh's own interpretation of Japanese *Mon*. The railings form the shape of a bow and arrow and, impaled on the spikes sit circular discs which are thought to clearly resemble the Japanese *Mon* shape.<sup>49</sup> Each motif varies from the next, Mackintosh choosing not to depict already existing designs but his own interpretations of insects from the natural world: he portrays a scarab beetle, a bird, an ant, a bee and a lady bird.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ono, p.25.

<sup>47</sup> Ono, p.61.

<sup>48</sup> Kikuo, Tanaka, 'いろは引紋帳. 2', (*Iroha biki mon cho; Iroha-biki moncho*) (Tokyo: Meiji 14, 1881).

<sup>49</sup> Buchanan, p.79.

<sup>50</sup> Buchanan, p.25.

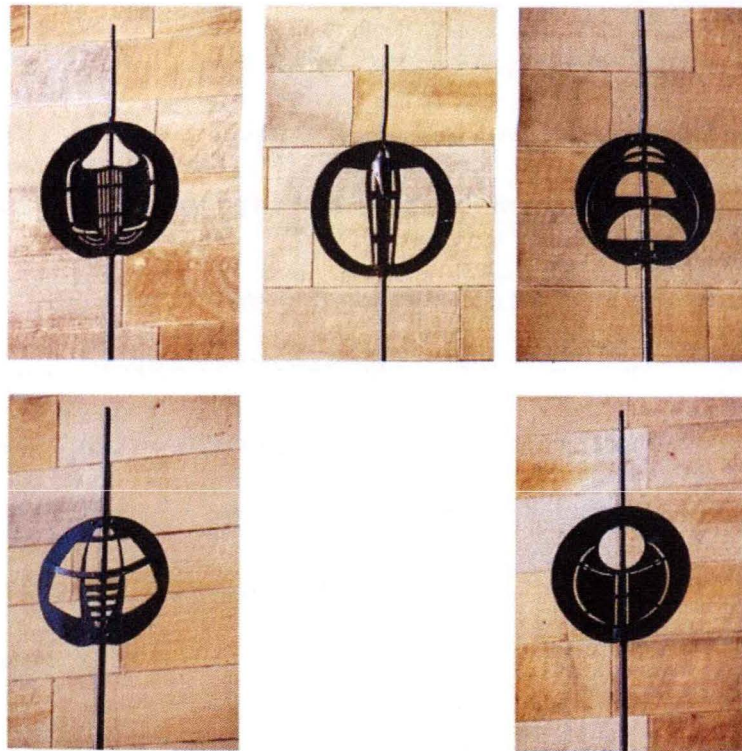


Figure 9: Symbolic Railings on North Façade. (Left to Right) Scarab beetle, Bird, Ant, Bee, Ladybird

Architectural historian, W.R.Lethaby, who was working at the same time as Mackintosh, stated that, architecture would enjoy a successful reception if it displayed symbolism that was “immediately comprehensible”.<sup>51</sup> However, the symbols on the railings would undoubtedly appear incomprehensible to a typical Glaswegian in the 1900’s. Even today, as a tour guide at the school, I regularly witness visitors struggling decipher what they represent. Timothy Neat, comments that Mackintosh had a desire to restore the “magic to the debased architecture of his day”.<sup>52</sup> Elaborating on this point he states:

It was not enough that the decoration and ornamentation of a building should have meaning, he demanded the totality of a building should be meaning-full...the architect should see his work as part of a much larger whole, a metaphysical world.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> W.R. Lethaby, quoted by Buchanan, William in, *Mackintosh's Masterwork, The Glasgow School of Art* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1994), p.25.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy, Neat, *Part Seen, Part Imagined – Meaning and Symbolism in the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald* (Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1994), p.154.

<sup>53</sup> Neat, p.154.



Producing something “comprehensible”, conforming to Lethaby’s beliefs, was not Mackintosh’s intention. To break away from tradition, he had to pursue a symbolism that was unfamiliar, adding a sense of mystery to his work. The presence of these unusual railings, plays a part in the “larger whole” and aids Mackintosh in creating his own intriguing “metaphysical world” that Neat describes. Brett states that Mackintosh chose to use black wrought iron for these decorative features as it allowed him to retain his affection for “graphic fantasia” in structure, “linear invention straight from the sketch pad” taking three dimensional form on the building.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, reminiscent to the style of his poster in Figure 1 for the Glasgow Fine Arts Society, it is almost as if Mackintosh is echoing the thin inky black line of an Ukiyo-e woodblock print. Illustrated in heavy black wrought iron, the blonde sandstone serves as his page to work on.

Written in 1881, ‘いろは引紋帳. 2’ (*Iroha biki mon cho; Iroha-biki moncho*) by Kikuo Tanaka, documents 241 general categories of mon design. A copy of this book has been held by The Glasgow School of Art Library since 1882 and is now stored in their special collections.<sup>55</sup> Figure 10 shows an

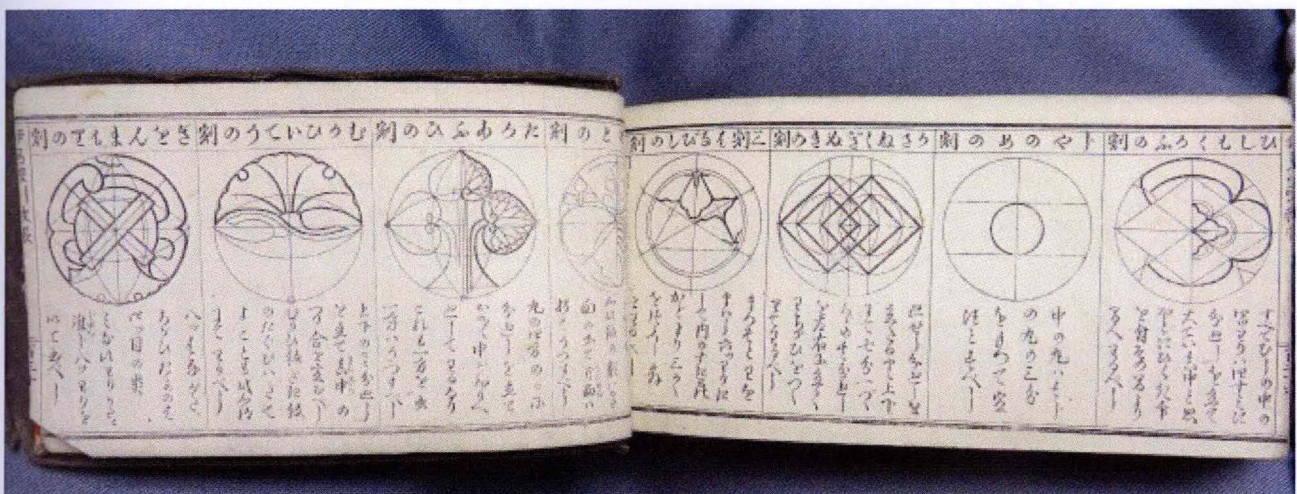


Figure 10: Page reads left to right, excerpt from ‘いろは引紋帳. 2’ (*Iroha biki mon cho; Iroha-biki moncho*) by Kikuo Tanaka.

<sup>54</sup> Brett, p.96.

<sup>55</sup> Glasgow School of Art Library Catalogue, いろは引紋帳. 2, <https://capitadiscovery.co.uk/gsa/items/eds/cat03982a/GSA.66901?query=%E3%81%84%E3%82%8D%E3%81%AF%E5%BC%95%E7%B4%8B%E5%B8%B3.+2%E2%80%99&resultsUri=items%3Fquery%3D%25E3%2581%2584%25E3%2582%258D%25E3%2581%25AF%25E5%25BC%2595%25E7%25B4%258B%25E5%25B8%25B3.%2B2%25E2%2580%2599%2B%26target%3Deds%26facet%255B0%255D%3Dfulltext%253Ayes&facet%5B0%5D=fulltext%3Ayes&target=eds>, [Accessed 17 November 2017].



excerpt displaying diagrams in which flowing and sinuous imagery transitions into more geometric forms, demonstrating how each circular Mon motif is created.

Mackintosh's decision to use Mon as decorative elements on the building displays that he had a knowledge of how these emblems were traditionally designed in Japan. Acquired by the art school library in 1882 when Mackintosh was a student, Tanaka's book may have provided the key information he needed to design the front railings. It truly demonstrates that Mackintosh was invigorated by Japanese design and he knew that if he could echo elements of the excitement he gained from studying it, he would be set on a path, in his own work that would project him towards a new architecture.

The fact Mackintosh never travelled to Japan, means that he provides an unusual representation of the country and allows him to be more selective in the way he represents its traditions. Figure 11, shows painting *Japanese Dancing Girls* by Hornel completed in 1894.<sup>56</sup>



Figure 11: *Japanese Dancing Girls* By E.A. Hornel, Oil on Canvas 26x36.

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<sup>56</sup>Bill, Smith, *Hornel, The Life and Work of Edward Atkinson Hornel* (Edinburgh: Atilier Books, 1997), p.84.

After returning from his year long trip to Japan, Ono believes Hornel's paintings were embellished to portray "exotic impressions of Japan", heightening the traditions of the country, in his western painter's style. In comparison, Mackintosh presents a representation of Japan in his work which is much more subtle and concept led. Clearly, the responsibilities and expected outputs of a painter and an architect are drastically different but what I feel makes Mackintosh's *Japonisme* more rewarding is the fact that, unlike Hornel's work, it has to be searched for and uncovered.

However, as this excerpt from the Glasgow journal *Building Industries* states, Mackintosh's new visual style presented challenges to the viewer:

The northern or Renfrew Street façade ... is full of problems which are altogether unsolvable at the first glance' – but one that commanded attention and was worthy of study and thought.<sup>57</sup>

This north section must have appeared, alien, blank and austere in comparison to the decorative facades around the city. Designed in 1891, and in close proximity to the art school, John James Burnett's Charring Cross Mansions, displays the typical architecture of the city at this point, its front façade covered in elaborate stone carvings, inspired by the neoclassical French *Beaux-Arts* style.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, Mackintosh presents us with something altogether more simplistic which, as the review states, came across as problematic and challenging. There was an indication of hope though, as the critic mentioned that, through study, there was potential to gain an understanding. However, this initial failure to comprehend what Mackintosh was trying to achieve, demonstrates that he was pioneering new movements in architecture, the Japanese influence being the key contributor to the birth of his new visual language.

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<sup>57</sup> Mackintosh Architecture, Concept Making and Meaning, 'Lifetime Reception', [http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/essay/?eid=crit\\_recep](http://www.mackintosh-architecture.gla.ac.uk/catalogue/essay/?eid=crit_recep), [Accessed 19 November 2017].

<sup>58</sup> Scottish Architects, 'John James Burnett', [http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect\\_full.php?id=200088](http://www.scottisharchitects.org.uk/architect_full.php?id=200088), [Accessed 2 January 2018].



## Tori-i

A Tori-i gateway in Japan is a symbol representing the entranceway to a Shinto shrine and signifies a moment of awareness and a potential for a change in attitude as we transition from one place to another.<sup>59</sup> Kuma states that Tori-i gateways originally were situated beside the mountain of a township and served as a passageway that connected humans to nature, as the mountain provided the essential energy and materials they needed to survive.<sup>60</sup> Stemming from this vital connection to the mountain's profits, Japanese culture has imbued within it a deep and enduring respect for nature and it is without doubt a quintessential characteristic of its traditional architecture. Sukiya-*daiku* (master woodworker) Nakamura Yoshiaki, re-enforces that historically, Japanese architecture and nature co-existed together, whereas traditionally, western architects adopted materials that would work against it.<sup>61</sup> He considers the way a building sits within the landscape and discusses the anatomy of its construction:

You would build a house as if it were a tree. The roof was light like the branches and the leaves. The tree trunks were the pillars and the roots were the foundation. We thought of ourselves as living under a great tree. That is the Japanese attitude towards architecture.<sup>62</sup>

Positioned on the top floor of the South Western side of the building, sits Studio 58. Arguably it is the most obvious interior with a characteristically typical Japanese influence. In accordance with Japan's ethos, Mackintosh had a strong affection for nature, as already displayed in his depictions of insects within the Mon railings. Indeed Studio 58 also evokes a narrative that has ties with Nakamura's statement in reference to the natural world. Within this space, the pillars represent supportive trunks that rise up to the roof or the canopy of the tree. As branches and leaves let in light, so too does the roof in this case, as on either pitched side there are skylights, allowing, soft, diffused light to disperse into the room. This space, was home to a variety of living plants and

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<sup>59</sup> Locher, p.157.

<sup>60</sup> V&A Museum of Design Dundee, 'Kengo Kuma in Conversation', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cblF3fBZ4y4>, [Accessed 18 October 2017].

<sup>61</sup> BBC, 'The Art of Japanese Life 3/3 | Home', (2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXGLh5pWf0s>, [Accessed October 2017].

<sup>62</sup> BBC, 'The Art of Japanese Life 3/3 | Home', (2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXGLh5pWf0s>, [Accessed October 2017].



greenery, used as studies for students to draw, situated in a small greenhouse structure cantilevered out on the South façade, accessed through the main studio space.<sup>63</sup> Positioned at the top of the building, we could say that Studio 58 represents the “great tree”, the canopy under which the students live and work.

Kuma states it is the use of timber in Japanese architecture that sets it apart from the rest of the world.

Traditional Japanese architectural design, in terms of its building, is based on an important element that is not found in most other countries. This is the presence of an abundance of strong, beautiful timber...How to use that timber so that it is capable of achieving strength as well as beauty is something the Japanese people have considered and worked on repeatedly for many thousands of years.<sup>64</sup>

It is evident Mackintosh had a strong appreciation for the integral use of wood within Japanese architecture. Figure 12, shows the interior of Studio 58. The shape of the timberwork is reminiscent of a Torii and it is the only studio in the school with such an impressive support of this sort.

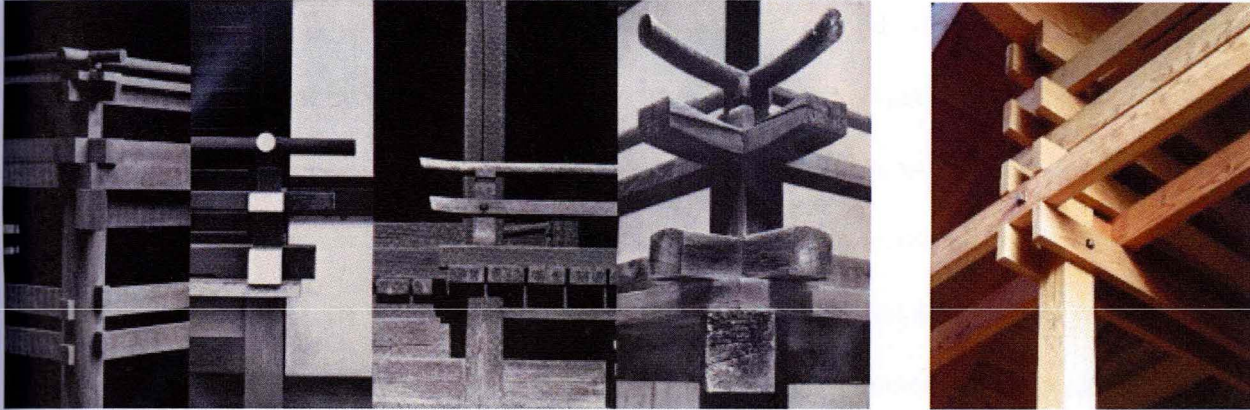


Figure 12: Timberwork in Studio 58

<sup>63</sup> GSA Archives and Collections, 'Design for Glasgow School of Art: back elevation, 1907', <http://www.gsaarchives.net/archon/?p=collections/findingaid&id=459&rootcontentid=10386>, [Accessed 16 November 2017].

<sup>64</sup> Locher, p.8.

Utilising Japanese carpentry techniques, Mackintosh seamlessly succeeds in achieving both “beauty” and “strength” within this space. The striking resemblance between a selection of traditional Japanese homes and the studio’s impressive interlocking timberwork is shown in Figures 13 and 14.



Figures 13&14: (left to right) Timberwork of traditional Japanese Houses depicted in Norman F. Carver’s book *Form and Space of Japanese Architecture* (SHOKOKUSHA PUBLISHING CO, Tokyo, 1955). Timberwork in Studio 58.

This typically Japanese woodwork sits in contrast to the room’s rough stone shell, influenced by Mackintosh’s affection for Scottish castles and traditional Scotch Baronial architecture.<sup>65</sup> The stone suggests the feeling of weight or “strength” and the exquisite carpentry “beauty”. There is a notion that this juxtaposition and play with materials should result in a feeling of discord. However, Mackintosh relieves this concern by creating a space that works in harmony and where one feels completely at ease. It is this element that makes Mackintosh’s depiction of Japan quite unique. He had an impressive capability to amalgamate the influences he gained from its art forms with other styles, creating his own hybrid visions.

Neil Jackson states that the main timber pillars and crossbars create “the effect of a Japanese tora or of the Naidai-mon of the Todai-ji at Nara.”<sup>66</sup> Here, he is describing the gateway to The Great Eastern Temple. Officially opened in 752 it is the ancient city of Nara’s oldest temple.<sup>67</sup> As previously mentioned, the gateway or Tori-i to a Shinto shrine, marks a change in awareness and a connection between humans and nature.<sup>68</sup> The first section of the art school, situated to the East, was

<sup>65</sup> Brett, p.77.

<sup>66</sup> Jackson, p.96.

<sup>67</sup> Todaiji, ‘The Todaiji’, <http://www.todaiji.or.jp/English/>, [Accessed 21 November 2017].

<sup>68</sup> Locher, p.157.



constructed from 1897-1899 and the Western side between 1907-1909, containing both studio 58 and the library.<sup>69</sup> The prominence of Japanese influence in these spaces, shows that this eight year gap in construction marks a phase in which Mackintosh must have been gathering a further knowledge of Japan's interior design styles and construction methods. It signifies a personal "change in awareness" representational of the symbolism attached with Torii gateways, as he transitions from one style to another. His ability to construct a sound "conceptual framework" was something Mackintosh had been building upon from his student years, while socialising in Glasgow's fine art circles.<sup>70</sup> By the time the second phase of construction was completed, the maturity with which he approached this area is evident. The interiors of the Western side demonstrate Mackintosh had a clear understanding of the arts of Japan and the concepts that governed them. As Muthesius described, he created spaces charged with an "artistic atmosphere" and Japanese sensibility, which is immediately tangible when you enter the building.

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<sup>69</sup> Buchanan, p.40.

<sup>70</sup> Brett, p.29.

## Conclusion

Art is the Flower - Life is the Green Leaf. Let every artist strive to make his flower a beautiful living thing, something that will convince the world that there may be, there are, things more precious more beautiful - more lasting than life itself.<sup>71</sup>

These words from Mackintosh himself, emphasise the respect he held for the beauty that lies within nature, in accordance with the beliefs of Japan. It is obvious that Mackintosh was striving to open his awareness to the world around him, embracing numerous styles of art and culture which would provide a source of nourishment to his own artistic output. He wanted to produce an architecture that was yet unknown to society and educate as to what form a building could take, in an attempt to convince the masses that everyday life could function in buildings that were complete works of art. The Japanese influence provided him with the pivotal vehicle for change he needed and is the key element that forms Mackintosh's unique style.

This essay has explored the way in which Mackintosh was exposed to the arts and culture of Japan through the vibrant art scene in Glasgow at the turn of the century. It has examined the way in which he portrayed a representation of Japan through the concept *Ma* and symbols *Mon* and *Tori-i* and proposed that Mackintosh's depiction of Japan is unique as he had an ability to combine it with other cultural styles. Referring back to Arata Iozaki's statement that:

A Japanese person looking at the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh is immediately struck by how 'Japanese' his designs are.<sup>72</sup>

we can conclude that Mackintosh, who adopted the techniques perfected by artisans over thousands of years, is a beacon of architectural design, even in Japan. It is a testament to his legacy that today the likes of Kengo Kuma look to his designs for inspiration.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Rennie Mackintosh quoted by Pamela Robertson in, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: Art is The Flower* (London: Pavillion Books Limited, 1995).

<sup>72</sup> Arata Iozaki, quoted by Crawford, Allan in, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* (Glasgow: Abbeville Press, 1996), p.346.

<sup>73</sup> V&A Museum of Design Dundee, 'Kengo Kuma in Conversation', [Accessed 18 October 2017].



The Glasgow School of Art is currently at a crucial point in its history as on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2014 an electrical fire broke out in the basement of the building, causing major devastation throughout the West side of the structure.<sup>74</sup> The Library and Studio 58 were completely destroyed. Neil Jackson states that this tragic event meant that:

the country lost more than an architectural masterpiece: it lost an extraordinary example of the architectural dialogue between Japan and the West.<sup>75</sup>

This statement is indeed true, as this essay has shown the ways in which Mackintosh had the capability of representing both styles simultaneously. However, there is hope as the decision to restore the building faithfully to its original 1910 appearance, means that this precious “dialogue” is granted to begin once more.<sup>76</sup> Although arising from such an unfortunate event, this restoration is a valuable opportunity for the school to restore The Glasgow School of Art building to Mackintosh’s original design and is scheduled to be completed in spring 2019.<sup>77</sup> The reopening of the Mackintosh building will be a truly significant moment in architectural history. It will re-establish an exquisite example of the relationship between Japan and the West and ensure that Mackintosh’s legacy continues to be evermore “precious, more beautiful- more lasting”.

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<sup>74</sup> Jackson, p.99.

<sup>75</sup> Jackson, p.99.

<sup>76</sup> The Glasgow School of Art, ‘Mackintosh Building Restoration’, <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/about-gsa/mackintosh-building-restoration/>, [Accessed 28 November 2017].

<sup>77</sup> The Glasgow School of Art, ‘Mackintosh Building Restoration’, <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/about-gsa/mackintosh-building-restoration/>, [Accessed 28 November 2017].

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